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Abraham Lincoln's Religion

A SUNDAY LECTURE

BY THE RABBI OF THE

Rodeph Shalom Congregation

PITTSBURG, PA.

SERIES 8

FEBRUARY 7, 1909

No. 15

These Sunday Lectures are distributed FREE OF CHARGE in the Temple to all who attend the Services.

Another edition is distributed free to friends of liberal religious thought on written application to the Rabbi,

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Abraham Lincoln's Religion*

Kings shall hold their mouth because of him; for that which had not been told them shall they see; and that which they had not heard shall they understand. (Isaiah lii., 15.)

The advent of men of genius is an inexplicable event. They are the unanticipated lightning flashes in a wintry sky. They illumine the horizon like an unexpected Aurora Borealis. They break chains. They loosen fetters. They rend shackles. They depose policy and enthrone principle. They pierce the demons of injustice with the glittering sword of right. They are as dew in the heat of the conflict, and water to the soul that thirsts. In a word, they are the incarnation of the spirit of religion.

The Holy Company of Prophets.

Like the breaking of the dawn they come, the bringers of good tidings. They are the heralds of a new era. They are like the Messiahs, the suffering servants of God, depicted in the fifty-third chapter of the Book of Isaiah. In their day, they are the despised and rejected of men; yet they live long after death. They sow spiritual seed.

*A lecture delivered February 7, 1909, before the Rodeph Shalom Congregation, Pittsburgh, Pa., by J. Leonard Levy, Rabbi. Stenographically reported by Caroline Loewenthal.

They lead many unto righteousness. The cause of God prospers in their hands. They are men of no personal comeliness. There is no beauty in them that they should be desired. Upon their shoulders is placed the task of bearing the burden of human suffering. Upon their tragic faces are burned the rugged lines of care. Gaunt and unlovely in appearance, awkward and often unpolished in speech, unwilling to bend the knee to the Baal of social convention, they are the hated and despised of their age.

They are the men who hear the voice of God speaking from the flaming heights, aye, from the Sinai of the human heart. They are the men who see God in the wilderness; they speak with Him face to face. They can follow Him, they cannot turn back. A long-ranged view of humanity is granted unto them. They cannot be untrue to the heavenly vision. Right and Justice, Truth and Goodness, are the accents they hear with the spiritual organ of an inspired imagination. They cannot, if they would, be faithless to the eternal music of the spheres. Grim and grave are they, set of jaw and firm of purpose. They can die, but they cannot, and will not, lie. Their cry is, "Forward, face to the foe!" They never fall stricken in the back. When, in the silent watches of the night, others sleep, they hold communion with the Spirit of the universe. When others are occupied building fortunes up to the heavens, only to hide heaven from their view, they are exploring the elemental truths of human existence and pledging their all in defence of them.

The Salt of the Earth.

When these men of moral genius have seen from afar the Land of Promise; when God has vouchsafed to them

a vision of the City Beautiful; when there flashes upon their inner consciousness a picture of a New Jerusalem; when they dream of "the city whose name is Righteousness," whose walls are Holiness, whose ruler is Equity, and whose defence is Love; they cannot eat, they cannot sleep, they cannot drink, until they have shared with others that which God has vouchsafed unto them. Light, lofty mountain peaks, they stand alone. They desire solitude for a time. For forty years, perchance, they wander in a wilderness, caring for the sheep of God. For forty days and forty nights, without seeking the nourishment that ordinary souls demand, they speak with God, and bring the unbreakable tablets of Right and Truth to their fellows. They drain the cup of sorrow. Upon their head is placed the crown of thorns. In derision, men put into their hands wooden sceptres and cry, "Art thou, indeed, king?" Yet these men are the salt of the earth. They are the saviors of mankind. Among every race such are to be found. Wherever God's sun illumines the earth, there, at some time or other, such have risen "to witness to the light," to be spokesmen for the causes dear to God.

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The Birth of Lincoln.

The man whom the nation honors this year, the hundredth anniversary of whose birth will be celebrated by the American people on Friday next, was such a man of moral genius. Lips have not yet been created that can pay to Abraham Lincoln the perfect tribute. He has risen above all human praise. He sits enshrined beyond the power of man to add to his dignity or to derogate from

his greatness,—Lincoln, born in the manger, as it were, of a Kentucky homestead, Lincoln, the child of poverty, Lincoln, the unschooled, rude, back-woodsman, Lincoln, the man of the people, Lincoln, a king among men. We see him today lying in his swaddling clothes in the little cradle in Hardin County, Kentucky, on the 12th of February, 1809. We see him sprawling on the ground, lying on his stomach, figuring mathematical problems on the back of a shovel, reading his five books, his whole library, by the light of the fire. We see him, a ferryman earning a dollar and a half a week rowing a boat across the Ohio River. We see him at the age of seventeen, receiving the last instructions in the brief period of his schooling.

The Story of His Life.

We see him struggling against adverse financial fate. We see him endeavoring to develop an honest business, yet failing to make a success of it as the commercial morality of his day counted success. We see him in the law office, practicing law, and establishing justice between men. We see him a captain in the Black Hawk War, offering his life in defence of his nation. We see him a pioneer of the Western land which is becoming the granary of the world. We see him elected to Congress. We notice him, already at that period of 1846, denouncing slavery. We see him ten years later at the formation of the Republican party, and in 1860, we see him elected President, having passed from cabin to Capitol, from lowly hut to the White House, a man yet destined to become a source of the greatest glory to the nation he served so well. And, now, events move quickly.

We see him entering Washington in secrecy because assassination was feared. We see him delivering his First Inaugural, pleading for the United States, setting the Union above all things, and delivering the pronunciamento of the Prophet. We see the reply fired on Fort Sumter in contemptuous disregard of his request. We see him harassed by doubters, and annoyed by private and public lack of confidence. We hear the taunts of a Stanton and a Chase.

We see the mighty civil strife increasing in intensity, so that upon him was laid the burden of the nation's sorrow. We hear this Father Abraham calling for troops and as, by a wave of the hand, we see a million men rise almost over night, like the followers of Roderick Dhu, to defend the cause for which he stood. We hear him reading the Proclamation of Emancipation. We see him worried, attacked, thwarted, by bickerings in the army. We see his Cabinet opposed to him. We see him unwavering, firm, immovable as a mighty rock, fearlessly withstanding the masses who hurled their scornful epithets at him, and bravely confronting the seething, roaring Red Sea of cruel war as it spread its dire desolation.

The End and Apotheosis.

We see him re-elected in 1864, and without fear he re-iterates, in faith, hope and charity, the principles for which the nation had struggled for four years. Again we see the bright dawn of April 9th, 1865, when Lee surrendered at Appomattox, and the Union was saved. For five days he enjoyed the proud privilege and the beatitude of the peace maker; and then the hand of the misguided

zealot laid him low, silenced the voice that had always spoken for justice and for right, and sent to the grave the man whose hands had always been raised in blessing.

This hasty review brings before our mental vision the great Lincoln, a man of moral genius. He is one of the greatest ethical and religious assets of the American people. He lived to make men free, and he died because he was misunderstood. A man of elemental simplicity, of almost infinite patience, of unsullied integrity, of sterling honesty, of sublime faith, of unyielding moral purpose, he unconsciously carved his name on the imperishable tablet of human gratitude and achieved a foremost place in the Temple of undying Fame. He kept the Ten Commandments and realized the Nine Beatitudes. He was great in his goodness.

Doomed, but Saved.

There is none perfect but God, and Lincoln was not God. He was supremely human, but intensely noble. His was a deeply religious soul. Weighed by human creeds he may be found wanting, but tested by the qualities dear to God, he was one of His chosen. Rejected by sectarian dogmatists, he was, nevertheless, acceptable to the Father of all. Doomed by Articles of Faith, he was saved by the possession of the "clean hands and the pure heart," which entitle their owner to "abide in the hill of the Lord and to dwell in His tabernacle." The opinions of a bitter and bigoted past, which he could not accept, would cast him out from the eternal justice of God, but he felt secure in the Divine Love. He knew that the Divine will is righteousness and that God accepts all who seek Him with all their heart and soul.

The Meaning of Religion.

If I hold that Lincoln was religious in the best sense of the term, it is because we must differentiate between theology, creed, dogma and religion. For, what is religion? It is the consciousness of God's overruling Presence, and the performance of duty as done unto Him in His sight. There are many who overburden, who overload religion with ritual and ceremony, as there are many who would have us believe that religion is to be gauged by creeds and Confessions of Faith. Religion bears reference to what a man is, rather than to what a man says he believes. It is the recognition of the immediate, and personal accountability of man to his Maker. Of this the test cannot be the creed, but the life. Religion is a sentiment, deep, holy, all-encompassing, but a sentiment nevertheless; and like every other sentiment it can only be estimated by the life it inspires, by the personality it produces. Let a man be possessed of never so finely-woven a chain of creedal statements; let him hold the most deftly constructed Confession; let him cry aloud with never so earnest a voice, Credo, Credo, "I believe, I believe"; I, nevertheless, hold that conduct and not creed is the measure of religion.

The following lines express my own view, and I think, yours also:

'Tis not by prayers loud and long,
By contrite beating of the breast,
By psalm, by hymn, by sacred song,
God's name most truthfully is blest.

'Tis not by ceremonies vain,
By antique creed, by ancient rite,

By customs, which your souls disdain,
 You worship God, the Lord of Right.

But when you aid the righteous meek,
 Bring light unto the darkened mind,
Support the falling, help the weak,
 You praise the Lord of all mankind.

Love mercy, practice justice true!
 Strive e'er to make injustice fall!
Assist thy fellow-man, and you
 Will worship God, the Lord of all.

If in these words we find an interpretation, however weak, of the spirit of Israel's Prophets; if they represent, however feebly, the point of view of Isaiah and Micah, and later worthies of the House of Israel; who shall say that Lincoln was not religious? His, too, was a religion of simplicity. "Whenever a church will write over its doors, 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and might,' and 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself,' and impose no other qualifications for membership, that church will I join." In words, such as these, Lincoln asserted the faith that was in him. One whose words bear authority to hundreds of millions of men said that these are the two greatest commandments, as they were always recognized to be in Israel whose prophet wrote them.

Lincoln a Religious Man.

But Lincoln, though religious, was not a believing and confessing Christian. He was not a member of a church. Many say that, on this account, he was not religious, and that he is not among "the saved." Some of the noblest souls who ever lived were too broad for the

narrow limits of many a church. Some of the cruellest, and most unscrupulous of men have been church-members, founders or endowers of churches. I, for one, will take my chances in the after-life with Abraham Lincoln, rather than with Charles IX of France, or Charles I of England, or Tomas Torquemada of Spain. The God who will accept these and cast him out of eternal life is one for whom I have naught but contempt. I shall trust myself to the God Lincoln loved, with much more confidence than the god of recreant kings and persecuting ecclesiastics.

A Religion of Honesty.

Lincoln's religion may be expressed by the word "Honesty." He was known in his day as "Honest Abe." It was not politicians who called him "honest," but the plain people he loved and who loved him. He earned the title worthily. He was a lawyer, an honest man, one who "feared the Lord and hated lucre." As illustrating his high sense of honesty, it is said, so I have read, that Herndon, his partner, in preparing a brief, took some matter for granted, thinking that it might be true, and employed it as an argument. Lincoln read the brief and asked Herndon concerning this matter, "Herndon, do you know if that is so?" He replied, "No, I only guessed at it." Then Lincoln said, "Herndon, that comes pretty near being a sham; and a sham comes pretty near to being a lie. Don't let it go on the record. If you do, some day this cursed thing may come up and stare us in the face long after the case is settled." On another occasion a client came to him to prosecute a claim for him against a poor widow. Lincoln considered the matter and said,

"I think I could win this case. I could get these few hundred dollars from the widow with the helpless children; but I think it probably belongs to her quite as much as to you. I could do it, but I won't. There are some legal rights which are moral wrongs."

A Religion of Kindness.

He was honest. He acknowledged his conscience as king. He was guided by what he thought, not by what other men said they thought. He was sympathetic and tender. Read that sweet little book, "The Perfect Tribute," and it may well be true to fact, and you will see what considerateness this man could exercise. Visiting his men in the camp, always bringing a word of cheer for the suffering, shedding light about men from whom the light was forever going out, sitting at the side of the sick in the hospital, pardoning the erring and using his supreme power mercifully, this man was saved by his keen sense of humor and by the gentle pulsations of his divinely sympathetic heart.

A Religion of Patriotism.

Lincoln was a patriot. He loved his country. He believed in the government. The country, for him, meant not the woods and templed hills. The country, for him, meant not the soil upon which he stood, although there is something within the human heart that attracts us to the place of our birth. As a matter of personal experience, to this day, I am not able to forget the wooded, sweet-smelling lanes of England, her verdant hedgerows, her velvety green fields, her beautiful manors, her pretty picturesque rivers. You, who were born in America feel,

no doubt, with regard to canyon and mountain and hill and valley and prairie as I do about England. But love of country is something higher than love of place. It means devotion to the ideals for which the country stands. When I recall the fact that my spiritual ancestors came from Palestine, I always feel again like visiting that land. That passion moved me so long that, years ago, I had to yield to it; I had to go to the scenes of Israel's childhood, and walk over the paths made sacred by the footsteps of David and Solomon. Isaiah and Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea. It was not the land of Palestine that called. It was the ideals, which there found expression: the one God for one humanity, the passion for right that inspired our prophets, the tuneful and uplifting Psalms of David, the divine faith stirred by our masters and their messages, the undying words that leaped from the lips of prophets in the vales of Judea and on the hill tops of Samaria. It was Zion and Sinai that called, and all for which Zion and Sinai stood.

His Appeal to the Modern Patriot.

We of America love our land, but yet more should we love, as Lincoln loved, the ideals for which this land stands. Oh, for the spirit of a Lincoln incarnate today in the men of this nation! Oh, for the resurrection of the spirit of this martyred President to move us to love what he loved, and to serve what he served, and to struggle for what he struggled! Every State of the Union that he died to save, sends up to high heaven the appeal of the patriot that the citizens love the ideals of America: Liberty, Equal justice, Rights of men, Free education, Abolition

of all political machines, Denial of the idol of party regularity. Lincoln's spirit today would save the Union if we were to become moved by it.

On a hallowed spot in our State our great Chieftain said, during the Civil War, "We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting-place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it far above our power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us, the living, rather to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us, that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion; that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain; that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom, and that government of the people, by the people, and for the people, shall not perish from the earth." Pennsylvania made great by this utterance, one of the grandest as well as one of the simplest that ever escaped from human lips, need feel the thrill of this Gettysburg address, which is full of powerful suggestion to us in our day. Ah, if ours were Lincoln's religion, we would set country above our low aims, patriotism would be a virtue ranking foremost among our ethical sentiments.

His Religion the Coming Faith.

Lincoln's religion was the expression of the coming faith. He anticipated the rational faith of the twentieth century of the present era, which is a renewal of the faith of the master minds of Holy Scripture. These masters insisted that conduct, not creed, is the supreme element in religion. They demanded righteousness as the fulfilment of the law. They stated that, without righteousness, the most logical statements of dogmas are as filthy rags. Belief and Conduct were, with them, practically synonymous. The life, not the recital of creeds, was with them the evidence of the spirit of God in man.

If to be honest is to be religious; if to be faithful to duty is to be religious; if to be loyal to conviction in spite of consequence is to be religious; if to be devoted to the righteous cause is to be religious; if to bring freedom to the oppressed and release to the slave and enlargement to the bound is to be religious; if to be patriotic in the highest degree is to be religious; if to be a servant of mankind is to be religious; if to be inspired with faith, to be uplifted by hope, to exercise the tenderest charity is to be religious; if to die to make others free is to be religious; if to believe that one should love God and display that love by affectionate justice toward one's fellow-men is to be religious; then was Lincoln religious in the highest degree. Lincoln's religion was devoid of formalism and ritualism; it was free from soul-cramping dogmatism; it was untainted by bigotry. It was a high expression of those fundamental virtues, those basic qualities that mark the highest manhood. It was expressed by honesty, sincerity, patriotism, malice toward none and

charity for all. It was a universal creed, the noble expression of his universal goodness.

Estimates of His Life and Work.

He died, and as Isaiah, in the text quoted, said, "kings held their mouth in reverence of him," for he made them see what they had not understood, that the humblest babe in a new, untried land, moved by the spirit of right and truth, is a king, and that human sovereignty is greater than regal splendor. Rising in the House of Commons, when the news of the death of Lincoln reached England, Benjamin Disraeli said, "Whatever the various or varying opinions, in this House, and in the country generally, on the policy of the late President of the United States, all must agree that in one of the severest trials that ever tested the moral qualities of man, he fulfilled his duty with simplicity and strength." On the Continent of Europe in that day, the most polished statesman was Emilio Castelar. Of Lincoln, he said, "His work! supreme achievement, over which humanity shall shed its tears and God His benediction." The poet says of him, truly and gracefully:

"The color of the ground was in him, the red earth;
The tang and odor of the primal things—
The rectitude and patience of the rocks;
The gladness of the wind that shakes the corn;
The courage of the bird that dares the sea;
The justice of the rain that loves all leaves;
The pity of the snow that hides all scars;
The loving-kindness of the wayside well;

The tolerance and equity of the light
That gives as freely to the shrinking weed
As to the great oak flaring to the wind—
To the grave's low hill as to the Matterhorn
That shoulders out the sky."

Like Unto a Moses.

Like a Moses, Lincoln cried, "Send away the people that they may be free," for upon his ear there fell the sound of the taskmaster's lash and the hissing of the whip. He led the turbulent people to the foot of a Sinai of duty, and he read to them the law of right and truth. He wandered with them through a wilderness of trial; before him went the pillar of cloud, difficulty, and the pillar of light, faith. He provided his people with manna, the heavenly manna of service. He drank the waters of Marah, and from the flinty rocks of callous hearts and out of the selfishness of brutalized masses, he made the waters of sympathy to flow. He spoke face to face with God. He reached his Nebo. For a few days, he looked over into the Promised Land, and then God gave his beloved sleep.

Like Unto a Jesus.

Like a Jesus, he was born in a manger. There were no angels, however, to announce his birth, but with his coming, there was the assurance of peace on earth and good-will toward men, as well as glory to God in the highest. He was born in poverty, and of him the doubting Nathaniels said, "Can there any good thing come out of Kentucky?" He saw the cause of the downtrodden and the oppressed, and he lived to make men noble, and

died to make them free. He pleaded for the law of justice and the gospel of liberty. God called him to be a witness to the truth. The plain people loved him. They heard him gladly. They cried before him, "Master." They accepted him as leader. They, however, placed upon his head the crown of thorns and surrounded him with the halo of martyrdom, because he drove the traffickers in human flesh out of the Temple of the Lord, and scourged with his bitter indignation the money-changers who dealt in human souls. He passed through the Gethsemane of trial. He prayed, "O that this bitter cup might pass away, but if it be Thy will, O Father, Thy will, not mine be done." He met his end on a Calvary, crucified as the truly great have so often been. Buried, he arose again, and he has since become a spirit immortal.

Lincoln the Religious.

Lincoln is known as The Martyr. Some call him The Immortal. Some think of him as a Savior of the Union. There are those who call him The Illustrious. There are those who place upon his head the crown of royal manhood. Some speak of him as Prophet, others call him Master. It is our conviction that, in ages not far remote, the grateful children of men will know him, whose memory, whose glory, whose life, whose birth, we celebrate next Friday, as Lincoln, the religious.

SUNDAY LECTURES
BEFORE
CONGREGATION RODEPH SHALOM

SERIES V.

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Activities of the Rodeph Shalom Congregation

To be held in the Temple during the
Week of February 21, 1909.

Sunday, Feb. 21 . . . Service at 10:30 a. m.
Religious School, 2:30 p. m.
Children's Service, 4:00 p. m.
Teachers' Meeting, 4:30 p. m.

Monday, Feb. 22 . . . Confirmation Class, 10:00 a. m.
Sewing Circle, 2:00 p. m.

Tuesday, Feb. 23 . . . Temple Lecture Course, 8:15 p. m.
Mr. Leland T. Powers.

Thursday, Feb. 25 . . . Confirmation Class, 4:30 p. m.
Current Topics Class, 8:15 p. m.

Friday, Feb. 26 . . . Post-Confirmation Class, 4:15 p. m.

Saturday, Feb. 27 . . . Confirmation Class, 9:15 a. m.
Sabbath Service, 10:30 a. m.
Sisterhood Bible Class, 11:45 a. m.